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ABSTRACT

The major curriculum issue in Norway focuses on the form of learning as opposed to the content of learning. At the turn of the century the school program emphasized content; teaching centered around the acquisition and storage of knowledge. During the 1920s and 1930s, however, theorists stressed the form of the educational process. The process of learning concentrated on the act of thought to the denigration of the content of thinking. Leading educators were influenced by John Dewey's "How We Think" in which he proposed his well-known five-stage thinking process. A new phase began a decade after World War Two with European critiques of Dewey's theory. The Norwegian scholar, Reidar Myhre concluded that "education must not lose sight of either the activity of thought or the content of thought." The School Law of 1969 emphasized that content and form intermingled. Finally, in the 1970s the national curriculum committee settled the controversy by recognizing content and form as an entity. The committee determined that the learning process is complex and cannot be reduced to psychological steps; the content of any discipline encompasses bodies of knowledge as well as forms of thought and understanding: and teaching-learning style is molded in the corresponding forms of thought and understanding. (KC)

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THE CURRICULUM FIELD TODAY

A SCANDINAVIAN POINT OF VIEW

by

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Introduction

In the discourses on curriculum issues, the term 'field' is used to denote the whole sphere of practice, study and investigation with which we are dealing. We often find phrases such as "the origin of the curriculum field", "the development of the curriculum field", "working in the curriculum field". The metaphore alludes to the first and most common meaning of the term 'field': a piece of cleared land used for tillage or pasture and usually bounded by hedges, fences, boundary stones etc. According to The Oxford English Dictionary the term 'field' has also another basic meaning. The term denote an extended surface, a large stretch of sea, sky etc.

Norway, the country I come from has a long coastline; therefore, I am familiar with the second meaning as well as the first one. For me 'field' designates not only a piece of land, static in structure and surrounded by some kind of boundaries, but also a large stretch of sea with everlasting dynamic and without borderlines.

In this context I will use the term 'curriculum field' in the second meaning, as curriculum sea.

With the metaphor 'curriculum sea' I first of all want to focus on the dynamic character. The surface of the sea is never calm; the wind, with different degrees of intensity and from various directions, blows perpetually along the surface. Therefore, it changes from morning to evening, from day to day, from season to season. Beneath the surface are deep and powerful streams of cold or warm water. Secondly, the metaphor 'curriculum sea' reminds me of the wideness and openness of the field. Thirdly, it suggests that the practitioner in the school and the scholar at his desk not only are working in a certain field, but they are also sailing on a large stretch of sea. Certainly they have a destination in mind and a draft at hand, but they sail under conditions which are beyond foolproof scientific and technical control.

My theme: The Norwegian Curriculum Sea .

In the last decades the wind blowing along the surface of the Norwegian curriculum sea has changed in direction and intensity. In the 50's we noticed the coming of a fresh audio-visual breeze. The wind grew and turned into a moderate gale, named educational technology, in the 60's.

However, just around 1970, the gale suddenly and unexpectedly calmed down, and another arouse, from what corner is difficult to say. This new gale blew against educational technology and was felt as a soft human touch. It blew against the established social and political order, and inspired to some kind of anarchism in the schools. It blew away from the bare facts, the plights of everyday life and the boredom of details, in practice as well as in theory, and lifted teachers and scholars from

reality towards an educational heaven.

These conditions lasted for a couple of years. To-day the above described wind has almost faded away, and another one seems to gain strength. The contemporary wind moves the vessels of teachers and educational theorists back to the harbours of reality, back to the tasks waiting for diligent service here and now.

Much more could of course have been said about all this, and about the consequenses for educational practice and theorizing. I will, however, desert that enterprise , because it is my conviction that to have knowledge of the streams underneath the surface are of greater importance. The metaphor 'sea' and the geographical position of Norway remind me of that. In our country there can blow a cold wind from the North Pole or from Siberia, all the same the climate is astonishingly mild, thanks to the warm Gulf Stream which washes our shores.

Content - form. The main currents in the curriculum sea.

What, then, are the main and most powerful currents in the curriculum sea? Through centuries and up to today it is realtively easy to identify two: content and form. They are actually closely connected and mutually dependent on each other; it seems, however, that they alternate in having the upper hand over one another. This has been the case both in the practice and in the educational theorizing.

When the content has the upper hand the life in classrooms is restrained by the emphasis laid on the aquisition and storing of knowledge. As a result the students certainly have information about areas of subject matter, but usually only a superficial knowledge of these matters. They also have poor training in using the information in the apropriate forms of thinking.

When the content has the upper hand in curriculum theorizing there is a tendency to view the school programme as composed of disciplines, cultivated for centuries and with an academic orientation.

At the turn of this century the situation in Norway was not unlike the one just sketched.

In the 20's and 30's the situation changed at least in theory. This change in curriculum theorizing was caused by a more profound understanding of the psychological aspects of teaching and learning. As a concequence the form, not the content, got the upper hand. When the form was in focus, stress was laid either on the process of learning as such or on the development or modification of certain abilities, skills and attitudes, which were defined in psychological terms only.[1)]

What is meant by emphasizing the process can best be expemplified by the attention leading educationalists gave to John Dewey's book How We Think . The five-stage thinking process introduced by Dewey was interpreted as the complete act of thought. The intelligent thinking begins with a predicament in which action is blocked, and then leads to closer obervation, to defining the problem in its contexts, to suggestions about causes and remedies of the difficulty, to different try-outs in thought, and, finally, to an act of some kind that confirms or disconfirms the prediction.

This complete act of thought tended to denigrate the content of thinking. First by stressing the process as such. Secondly, by making Dewey's five-stage process of thinking a model for all forms of thinking and understanding.

Quite often progressive teachers in the school saw in these ideas an excuse to by-pass systematic teaching of the subject matter. The honoured slogan in that periode was: "The process, not the content, is the subject-matter of schooling."

A decade after World War II the state of curriculum thought changed again, and a new phase in curriculum theorizing emerged.

The contemporary situation - a synthesis.

The new phase begins with a critique of John Dewey's conception of how we think. A scholar with an influential position in the training of teachers, Herman Ruge, argued that Dewey's description of the process of thinking certainly portrays an adequate human encounter with some domains of reality, those belonging to the affairs of daily life and the problems of natural sciences. The discription is, however, misleading when pertaining to other domains of experiences and other modes of understanding, for instance those expressed in the humanities and the fine arts.

When considering John Dewey's conception of how we think in the perspective of the history of ideas, Ruge calls attention to Dewey's reaction against the German philosopher and educationalist Johann Friedrich Herbart. Herbart emphasized the aquisition and mastery of public ready-made knowledge. John Dewey turned to the other extreme; he emphasized the production of knowledge by the individual himself. In the search for a synthesis of the two points of view, Ruge turns to a philosopher prece ding John Dewey and Herbart, Friedrich Fröbel. Ruge underlines Fröbels famous phrase: "Das Äussere zu verinnerlichen und das Innere zu veräusseslichen". [1)]

Another scholar, a younger man approaching the field of educaticnal theory after years of research on the history of ideas, Reidar Myhre, later professor of the history and philosophy of education,

dealt with the problem content-form in a textbook for students at colleges of education, published in 1959. After an account of John Dewey's complete act of thought, he turns to the criticism recently published in the US, and sites even Theodor Brameld.[3] Myhre's analysis of the issue concludes with a thesis, shortly expressed by a sentence taken from Frederick S. Breed: "Education must not lose sight of either the activity of thought or the content of thought."[4]

A student of Reidar Myhre's who at about the same time published his first book, an analysis of the contemporary Norwegian curriculum debate, with the american criticism of progressive education in mind, quotes Jaques Maritain:

> "Modern pedagogy has made invaluable progress in stressing the necessity of carefully analyzing and fixing its gaze on the human subject. The wrong begins when the object to be taught and the primacy of the object are forgotten, and when the cult of the means- not to an end, but without an end - only ends up in a psychological worship of the subject."[5]

Ten years later, Bjarne Bjørndal, professor of curriculum studies, published his analysis of contemporary American curriculum theories. The monograph sheds light on the Norwegian scene as well as the American. Bjørndal's account of the state of curriculum thought in US the ideas expressed in Harry S. Broudy's Building a Philosophy of Education and in Philip H. Phenix's Realms of Meaning are brought into focus as most interesting.[6] The Norwegian curriculum generalist, well educated in the history of ideas, certainly feels at home in the company of those two American scholars.

The scholar who, in the course of the last decades, most thoroughly has analyzed the Norwegian curriculum field is Hans-Jørgen Dokka, professor of history of education. At a meeting of educationalists in 1958 he said, slogans have during the recent years downgraded students aquisition of knowledge. The aquisition of knowledge has been portrayed as an uncritical memorizing of some selected books. In most cases, he argued, this is not the truth. The aquisition of knowledge, even from books, is an active process. Dealing with the task of the school he underlines well planned teaching and learning. The school is the only institution which has as its main responsibility an initiation into the public forms of knowledge and understanding.[7)]

As you know Norway is a small country, only 4 million inhabitans. The other Scandinavian countries are almost the same size. In none of them the population surpasses 10 million people. In all of them you will find a rather sentralized school system. The legislation is given by the parliament and a certain paragraph circumscribes the subjects or areas of teaching and learning. In addition the Ministry of Education issues an approved curriculum guide.

According to usual practice the school law of 1969 was prepared by a parliamentary committee. Reidar Myhre was a member of that committee. The stand which the committee took to the content-form controversy, has certainly been influenced by him. The committee underlined that content and form are intermingled. An example of this is especially demonstrated by the teaching and learning of the main school subject, Norwegian. Skills in speaking, reading and writing have to be developed in accordance with the aquisition of knowledge.[8)]

The curriculum committee, which was appointed a couple of years later, discussed the content-form issue even more thoroughly. The committee was headed by Hans-Jørgen Dokka. This committee analyzed the main principles in the previous curriculum guide lines, cleared the principles for a new one, and made a proposal for the one to be approved.[9)]

The committee settled the content-form controvercy which began at the turn of this century in this way: First, content and form are recognized as an entity. Secondly, the teaching/learning process is not simplified as a process to be comprehended as deduced from psychological theories. Thirdly, the content of the disciplines, or the group of disciplines, is considered to encompass bodies of knowledge as well as forms of thought and understanding. And, finally, the teaching/learning style is primarily - but not exclusively - considered as moulded in the corresponding forms of thought and understanding.[10)]

The effect of these ideas for the teaching and learning in classrooms and for curriculum theorizing would be best evaluated by a historian after year 2000.

NOTES

1. I use the term 'form' as Herbart M. Kliebard use it in the following context: "From a curriculum perspective, therefore, mental discipline and the activity curriculum had in common a disdain for content and a reverence for form. What was ultimately important in designing a curriculum was not what was learned, but the form that the learning activity took - how one engaged in the process."
   The Development of Certain Key Curriculum Issues in the United States, in P.H. Tayler and M. Johnson, Curriculum Development a Comparative Study. NFER Publishing Company 1974, p. 172.

2. Herman Ruge, "Arbeidsskolen i brennpunktet" in T. Harbo/ H.O. Tønnesen (ed.), Pedagogisk orientering, Oslo 1958, pp. 96-102. - The German statement is difficult to translate: The assimilation of knowledge is an active process as well as the production.

3. Reidar Myhre, Pedagogisk filosofi, Oslo 1959, pp. 218-232. Sites from Theodore Brameld's Patterns of Educational Philosophy, New York 1950, p. 553.

4. Ibid. p. 223 from Fredrick S. Breed, Education and the New Realism, New York 1939, p. 135.

5. Jacques Maritain, Education at the Crossroads, New Haven 1943, p. 14. Sited by T. Harbo in Målsetting og læreplan i den 9-årige skole, Oslo 1960, p. 19.

6. Bjarne Bjørndal, En studie i nyere amerikansk læreplan-tenkning, Oslo 1969.

7. Hans-Jørgen Dokka, Læreplanproblemer i folkeskolen, in T. Harbo/H.O. Tønnessen, pp. 72-96.

8. Innstilling fra Folkeskolekomitéen av 1963. Oslo 1965, pp. 122-126.

9. Innstilling I fra Normalplanutvalget av 1967. Forarbeid til Normalplan for grunnskolen, Innstilling II fra Normalplanutvalget av 1967, Forslag til Normalplan for grunnskolen, Oslo 1970.

10. Forarbeid, pp. 99-110, pp. 157-162. Forslag, pp. 23-74. - See also T. Harbo/R. Myhre/Per Solberg, Kampen om Mønsterplanen, Oslo 1982, Chap. II, VII, VIII.